

## LIVING BEYOND YOURSELF – WEEK #12

### The Fruit of the Spirit is Self-Control (Part 3)

Genesis 3:1–7

We've come to the last week in this study of the fruit of the Spirit, and the third session on the last fruit of self-control. Our struggle for self-control is always a fight against is **temptation**, isn't it?

We often think of temptation as an impulse to physical sins that involve food or drugs or adultery but there really are a lot of other temptations, that would lead us to sins of pride, despair, or dishonesty.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul says, **"All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything."** Anything, good or bad, can become addicting. And it can become your master, taking the place of Jesus.

Whenever we deal with temptation, we're dealing with the devil, and also the demonic forces that Paul calls **powers and principalities** in Ephesians 6. Daniel Chapter 10 illustrates these evil forces. Here Daniel is praying to God, and after several days an angel shows up and exclaims, **"I would have been here 21 days ago, but the prince of Persia ..." (that's where Daniel was praying) "... the prince of Persia kept me from coming to you. I had to do battle with him, and Michael, the archangel, came and helped me, and I've come through now in answer to your prayer."**

What does that mean? Who is the prince of Persia? Daniel is talking about a regionally-based demonic force. We know this because later the angel gets up and says, **"I have to go do battle now with the prince of Greece."** The biblical notion here is that there are regionally-based demonic forces called kosmokratōr.

**Kosmos means cosmic. Krateō means a strong man or a tyrant.**

There are COSMIC TYRRANTS who try set up a spiritual dome over a city or over a region. Then they stir up pride in us and keep us at each other's throats. If that seems unlikely to you, think about the events of this past week in our nation's capital... and all the fallout since then. What is happening in Daniel 10 is that, through prayer, Daniel punches a hole in the spiritual dome over Persia;

and the angel comes in and says, “We got through.” Could it be that we need to be praying as Daniel prayed, poking holes in the spiritual darkness?

Some people hear talk like this and get uncomfortable. “C’mon, Jeff/Patti you sound like a relatively intelligent person with probably at least an eighth-grade education. You’re kidding, right?” Well, no I’m not. You can’t begin to understand what the Bible says about temptation until you understand who the Serpent was who whispered in Eve’s ear.

About 300 ago scholars and philosophers said that science had disproved the possibility of the supernatural – especially miracles. Instead, there had to be a rational explanation for everything. This was the consensus of the educated class for three centuries.

But today, scholars have begun to realize that this is irrational. Science observes things you can touch, taste, hear, see, and smell. It can’t study the supernatural, so how can it disprove what it’s not studying? If there is a God, then it’s rational that there might also be angels and demons. What’s irrational is to believe in a personal God who is good, and an afterlife in heaven, but then not to believe also in a personal Devil, or the kosmokratōr, or hell itself.

How could anyone honestly look at the events of the past week and think, “If there’s a supernatural realm it must be that everybody’s going to heaven and everything is good, and there can’t be demons or evil.”

With regard to evil, there are two errors that Christians can make. One is **superstition**, which means “**over-belief**” – seeing the devil behind every negative thing that happens and attributing too much power to evil. On the other hand is **substitution**, which is “under-belief” that attributes everything to natural processes or human action. Superstition and substitution.

Maybe we can best understand the devil by comparing him to a blow snake. A blow snake deals with it’s enemies by puffing itself up - becoming really big and ugly, so as to scare you off. But if you don’t get scared off, he sucks himself in, flips over, lays down. In other words, he has to get you into either a superstitious

approach to blow snakes, or a substitious approach to blow snakes.

The devil operates the same way. Some Christians attribute too much power to him, believing that the devil is the source of all their problems. But other Christians reduce their problems to functions only of their physiology, background, or conditioning.

See, superstition underestimates the role of the sinful flesh. What I mean is that biblically, the Devil may be a musician, but he needs an instrument. He can't do anything unless you give him something to work with, which is why Ephesians 4 says, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger. Don't give into bitterness, and thereby give the devil a foothold."

Think of it this way – if you lift the top of a piano and sing a particular note into it (say, a B), all the strings will stay quiet but the B string will vibrate, and when you're done, you'll hear an echo, because there's something in that string that matches your voice.

The Devil can't make you do things. He'll just look for strings in your life that he can play a number on. Why do Christians often underestimate the compulsive side of sin? Because we think that addiction, despair, depression and other things that can ruin our lives, must come from outside of us. Consequently, we blame it on our parents, our circumstances, our brain chemistry or the devil himself.

But what if it's my sinful, selfish pride that has played right into the devil's hand? The flesh and the devil are always involved together. In the garden, Eve had something in her that the Serpent was playing, but the Serpent posed the question: "**Did God really say...?**" He's involved, right?

### **1. The attack**

Satan tells Eve "You will be as God." Temptation comes from lies. In 2 Timothy 2:25 Paul says, "**God, grant that they might repent and know the truth and be delivered from the snare of the Devil.**" You're not in a snare if you have the truth, because the truth sets you free. Distortion is what keeps you in bondage. And self-control is simply acting on God's truth.

What happens when Jesus is tempted in the wilderness? Satan tries to subtly inject a distorted view of God. He insinuates, “Why would God let you be so hungry? Why don’t you turn these stones into bread?”

In other words, “Why don’t you use your own power, Jesus, instead of relying on your Father?” Christ’s job on earth was to be our representative, to live a perfect life as a human being. A human being is supposed to depend on God for everything. So what does Jesus do? He says, “**man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.**”

Jesus always deals with the temptation in terms of truth. If you look at your own life you’ll see that what binds you is lies. Why are you tempted to feel sorry for yourself, or feel like you’ve had a terrible lot in life when the truth is that Jesus has saved you and you’re going to live with him forever? After all, if we got what we deserved we’d all be in trouble.

But when you forget that truth, you start to think, “Well, I’ve tried my best and where has it gotten me? What good is it being a Christian?” Lies like this are the source of every temptation. Neither the flesh nor demonic powers can make a Christian sin, because they’re not our king. It’s believing the lies. So how can we combat this?

## 2. The defense

“**The heart is deceitful and wicked above anything. Who can know it?**” the Psalmist asks. Your heart is trying to deceive you. So is evil. So find out what the lies are.

The main lie in Genesis 3 was that sin will fulfill you. That it’s sweeter and more natural than obedience. If you do it, you will be happy. And if you don’t, you miss out.”

The devil tries to get you to be your own god. He’ll whisper to you that if you are “If absolutely, completely obedient in every area of your life, then you’ll have problems in your career, in your relationships. He’ll whisper that while it’s nice to be a little religious and somewhat moral, but if you go overboard and get too

extreme in obeying every part of God's law, then you're going to miss out."

This first lie tempts you to believe that God is withholding something good from you.

See, if you believe that disobedience is more delicious and satisfying, more life-giving, than Jesus, then you're looking at Jesus only as fire insurance. You're looking at Jesus through the lie. The reason to come to Christ Jesus is not because he offers a comprehensive hell-protection-plan; it's because He's the Life that is truly life.

Notice what the Devil says in Genesis 3:1 - **"Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"** Well, no, he didn't. His command was not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. Satan didn't tell Eve, "God is such a liar." He wouldn't do that. Instead, he exaggerates. He insinuates that God is unfair. And the next thing you know, Eve is exaggerating, too. She says, "We're not allowed to eat of any tree in the garden. And we're not even allowed to touch that one." But God never said that. So what's really going on here?

The Bible is telling us that the first sin is not when you begin to disobey the commandment; the first sin is when you begin to **resent** the commandment. Eve was putting herself on the throne, thinking, "This command isn't practical. This command will get in the way of something I want. So I have to get out from under it."

If you look carefully, you'll see a number of small sins here. First, she bought the lie that God is unfair, which led to the sin of resentment. Then she began to desire the fruit. Then she fantasized about it, seeing that it was good to eat, She imagined the sweetness, which led her to decide to take a bite. Then she finally acted on her decision, and ate it. Lastly, she got Adam to do it too. And in seven verses, all of history comes tumbling down around them.

Temptation starts so small, you often don't notice. But whenever you start to resent God or His authority, or what the Scriptures tell you, that's a warning. Psalm 1 says that the mark of a godly man is that he loves the law of God and meditates on it day and night. He loves to have God tell him what to do! That's

where self-control starts.

Consequently, you can't conquer a lack of self-control unless you break temptation down frame by frame (like time-lapse photography) and begin to see the connections.

In sexual sin, for example, a thought occurs to you. There's nothing wrong with a thought occurring to you, right? But what do you do with it? Martin Luther said, "You can't stop birds from flying over your head, but you can stop them from making a nest in your hair."

The thought occurs, and then what? If you start to weigh it, that's where sin begins. The book of Judges tells of Achan, a member of the Israelite army. God's command was that when the Israelites conquered a city, they were forbidden to take any of the gold or riches for themselves. Instead, they had to put it in the tabernacle. But once when they were plundering a city, Achan saw that the gold bars weighed a certain amount, and he saw that the jewelry was exquisite, and the robes very beautiful.

He was assessing them, weighing them. And he was already resenting the commandment, which is the second step. The third step is fantasy. You think, "Well, I'm not going to do it. It would be wrong to do it, but I'm going to *think* about doing it.." Then fantasy gives way to deciding, and deciding to acting.

Why did David end up falling in love with Bathsheba - committing adultery with her, and killing her husband? The passage says David was at home during the season when kings went out to war. He was being lazy. There was work to be done, but David was home when he should have been out on the battlefield. That's step one.

Then he saw Bathsheba and he saw how beautiful she was. He saw her because she was taking a bath on a roof, and he noticed her through the window. He looked. He weighed. Then he fantasized. Then he decided. Then he acted. At any point along the way he could have let the priority of God and the truth of God prevail over his urges, but he didn't. Instead he wrongly concluded that a night with Bathsheba would be sweeter than obedience. And instead it brought untold

heartache.

The way to gain self-control then, is to be steeped in the truth of God's Word. Daily. To the point where you can quote it to the devil himself... to delight in both God's presence and His law.

And one last thing: it's good to know that temptations tend to come more forcefully at four particular times. One is what I would call **post-conversion let-down**. This happens after a person first comes to faith in Jesus. The devil points something out in your life that is a weakness, and because you don't understand the extent of grace yet, or the sweetness of obedience, or the tricks of the devil, you give in.

A second season that's important is **when you step into a new or greater role in God's kingdom**. That's when you move from the back lines of the army to the front lines, and suddenly bullets are flying everywhere, because the enemy is threatened.

A third area is **during difficult times**, when a particular sin begins to look like it could give you relief. You're having economic problems, so you're tempted to be dishonest. You're stressed at work, so you're tempted to eat too much or drink too much or spend too much. During times of affliction, temptation to sins such as gluttony, greed, and lust will present themselves as "relief." But the temporary relief will quickly give way to the emptiness of regret. That's the bait and switch. But the key to combating the devil's lies is to recognize them as such, and by asking the Holy Spirit to protect, lead, and guide you.

In this series, we've talked about nine aspects of the Fruit of the Spirit. But you can't grow this fruit on your own! Jesus said, "I am the vine. You are the branches. If anyone remains in Me, and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Without me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) The fruit of God's Spirit grows in us as we abide Jesus. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control grow out of our relationship with Him and are demonstrated in us because of Him.

Let's pray:

Almighty Father, in this world filled with goodness, evil, pleasure, leisure, lust and temptations, our desire is to have **the fruit of Your Spirit** evident in our daily lives. We repent of our sin and gratefully receive again your boundless forgiveness. Please heal our nation and grant us **a spirit of self control** to face the challenges ahead with calm assurance and freedom from selfish indulgence. In Jesus' name. Amen.

We're going to take a break from our mid-week study now for a little while, etc....